

# NEVADA Connections

*Produced by Community College Southern Nevada to connect resources for Nevada's adult workforce*

Volume 8 Number 12

June 2003

## Action to Impact: Program Improvement

Directors of Nevada's nine federally funded ABE programs — the programs funded through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) — focused on program evaluation and improvement through extensive training during 2002-2003.

Guided by Mary Katherine Moen, Nevada's Adult Education Director, and Adult Education Consultant Debbie White, the group practiced making meaning of evaluation as a means to program improvement. Instead of jumping immediately into specific evaluation tools, the group spent considerable time developing purpose and principles.

"First, you must understand what you are trying to accomplish and the value system within which you will operate. Then you can develop performance indicators to evaluate how you are doing," Debbie cautioned. "We all have a tendency to immediately jump to tasks and activities. We spend a lot of time making lists and setting deadlines. This should really be the last step, and it will likely be the easiest, if you've spent the time to develop shared purpose and principles, agree on appropriate performance indicators and standards, and use meaningful tools to measure performance."

The group came to consensus on purpose, principles, and performance indicators for the AEFLA-funded programs, and many individuals have implemented Debbie's model in their programs and projects. For example:

Vicki Newell, Director of the Northern Nevada Literacy Council, and her Board of Directors used it to develop a five-year strategic plan. Vicki also used the model to develop a detailed plan and schedule for the 18-24 Year Old Initiative; one of the instructors in her program would like to adapt the model for use with student goal setting.

Sheila Fairbairn, ESL Coordinator at CCSN, credits the model with "helping us first focus on where we are and where we want to be, then on selecting appropriate tools for curriculum revision." Several programs used the model to develop more effective evaluation tools, particularly for eliciting meaningful student feedback.

Debbie's 25-page summary of the training, *From Action to Impact: A Handbook for Using Purpose,*

*Principles and Performance Indicators to Improve Programs*, is posted on Nevada's Literacy Web site at <http://www.literacynet.org/nevada/pphbk.pdf>.

*Editor's note: The "Reflective Questioning" article reprinted on the following two pages, in addition to providing valuable information about learner input to program evaluation, shows how the development of purposes and principles can lead to improved process and more meaningful data.*

Editor: Sharyn Yanoshak  
Phone: 702/253-6280  
Fax: 702/651-4531  
E-mail: [saylv@lvcm.com](mailto:saylv@lvcm.com)

Community College  
of Southern Nevada  
3200 E. Cheyenne Ave. – K1A  
North Las Vegas, NV 89030

See back page for Nevada's  
AEFLA-funded ABE programs'  
purpose and principles.

# Reflective Questioning And Discussion: Tools For Evaluation

*By MaryAnn Cunningham Florez, reprinted from "Progress," (WV Adult Education Newsletter), Spring 2002*

Aristotle once said that the unexamined life is not worth living. I take that to heart in my personal life (usually late at night with a pint of caramel fudge ripple in hand) but I also work to make reflection and questioning a part of my professional life. In my role as a teacher creating responsive evolving instruction, I regularly incorporated reflective questioning and discussion to check in with learners and have them check in with themselves. It's been more difficult to carry this out as the administrator of a small community-based volunteer ESL program. However, I have tried to incorporate reflection in one important way: in the data gathering that I do when I evaluate our program.

At the end of every three-month session, I visit each class in our program and spend about thirty minutes asking learners to reflect on the work they and their teachers have been doing. I develop questions; they consider them individually; and then we discuss them as a group. With beginning level classes, I do this in Spanish (100% of our beginning learners are native Spanish speakers); with advanced classes, we do it in English. It is always an engaging and enlightening process for me, one that constantly reminds me that reflection is not a foreign concept to adult learners, even if they may not have all the language they need to discuss it in English or if at times they need some assistance keeping the process on track.



A great thing about reflection is that it is infectious. Working through reflective questioning and discussions with the learners spurs me to reflect not only on our program, but also on the process I use to gather data. I have now held four or five reflective conversations with learners; I recently sat down to look over my accumulated notes and thoughts and realized that I have learned a few helpful points about reflecting with learners.

## Lessons learned

One of the things that I realized almost immediately is the value of giving learners an opportunity to gather their thoughts before they start reflecting. As an administrator, I may walk into a classroom and "steal" a small amount of time for my information gathering. However, as the program's de facto substitute, I occasionally have two-hour blocks of time in which to work with the learners. In these cases, I have the opportunity to build in warm-up activities. When students have a chance to reassemble their memories and reactions to the time period in question and I have time to create a framework for the reflective questions, the process becomes much more efficient.

I have done a great deal of tinkering with the questions I use to guide the reflections. For example, I used to include a direct question on teachers and what they were doing in the classroom. Some learners, perhaps not wanting to appear critical of their teachers, did not respond. Others bluntly stated their opinions. Both responses quickly derailed the reflective process. When I started replacing the original question with questions that steered learner responses toward aspects of the class (e.g., activities or texts) and toward description rather than judgment, I seemed to get richer data — and less complaining.

A big part of successful reflection is knowing when personal expectations and preferences are coloring actions and reactions. That can be difficult. When I started asking questions that elicited learners' expectations and preferences at the beginning of the reflective process, it drew out information that often helped them (and me) clarify points and prompt new understanding of strong statements made later.

I know that adult learners come to the classroom with knowledge and experiences, and their learning usually involves incorporation of new information into existing structures. Therefore, rather than simply asking them what they thought of their classes, I started asking them to compare them to classes they had attended in the past. Helping them establish points of references and asking them to relate their current experiences to previous ones seemed to facilitate new reflection.

Initially, I was "all over the map" in terms of focusing my questions and expectations of learners' responses. In my enthusiasm, I sometimes offered them the proverbial blank sheet and said, "Write something." I began to think about the responses I hoped to get and whether or not learners would have the ready information,

perspective, and time to make them. That helped me move away from generalized or potentially all-encompassing questions (“What do you need to study for your life?”) and direct learners’ attention to specific issues or actions that were happening in their classrooms. I could then take the information they provided and draw out broader implications.

Perhaps the most important realization for me has been the need to make reflection a regular activity. This is where I have been most frustrated as an administrator with limited time and access to the learners. Reflection is by nature a regular, ongoing process. I am happy with the opportunities I have to reflect with learners and I value the information they give me. However, I know that if the learners become familiar with the process, comfortable with each other, and have a more manageable period of time with which to work, the information they provide multiplies in value. That’s why I hope that not only administrators but also teachers will consider some of the lessons that I’ve learned as they construct their own reflective activities.

### Reflective Questioning and Discussion: Tools for Evaluation

**Teachers** will want to schedule the following process on a regular basis, for example, once a week or at the end of a content unit or session. Allow approximately an hour for this activity. As teachers and learners familiarize themselves with the process over time, it should become more efficient and produce better quality data.

**Administrators** will want to think carefully about when and how often to schedule this activity to meet data gathering needs and the realities of time. Allow approximately an hour with some flexibility.

**Step I.** To begin, provide an activity for learners to focus their attention on the time period in question and to gather their thoughts. For example:

1. Ask learners to place post-it-notes in their books on the five or six pages that were most important to them during the period in question.
2. Have pairs or groups create quizzes that highlight the most important content they covered.
3. Have a small or whole group brainstorm session on what they studied.
4. Prompt learners

**Step II.** After learners have had an opportunity to prepare, use the following questions to draw out more information:

1. Have you studied English before? How were those classes similar to ours? How were they different?
2. When you started what did you think English class would be like? What did you think you would learn and be able to do when you finished? Is that what your English class has been like? What has been different?
3. Which topics are you studying that are really valuable to your life? Which aren’t? Name two situations in your life for which you need more English?
4. Describe an activity when you felt confused or disconnected. Describe an activity when you felt excited, like you were learning.
5. If you could change one thing in class, what would it be? What one thing would you not want to change?

*MaryAnn Cunningham Florez is assistant director of the National Center for ESL Literacy Education and volunteer administrator of St. Anthony’s Adult ESL Program in Falls Church. She has worked in the field of ESL as a teacher, staff developer, and materials writer for more than 10 years.*

## *Connecting resources for Nevada's adult workforce*



# Nevada Adult Basic Education

## Purpose

The purpose of Adult Basic Education in Nevada is to increase the reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension skills of adult learners so they can achieve their life, work and educational goals.

## Principles Guiding Our Programs

1. We value quantitative and qualitative information to guide and improve our programs.
2. We value accountability from students, staff and leaders.
3. We value ongoing evaluation and improvement of our programs.
4. We value the dignity of each individual.
5. We value a positive environment.
6. We value the inherent ability within all students to succeed.
7. We value student feedback.
8. We value sharing what we learn with others.
9. We value integrity in how we do our work; we are trustworthy in our actions.